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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the Partners in Literacy Project developed by Phelps County, Nebraska R-6 School District. This project involves a partnership among the school, the parents, and students in promoting the literacy development of students. This rural school district serves a student body of 43 and consists of 6 staff members. The students are from 23 families whose livelihood is primarily dependent upon agriculture. The first year of the project focused on encouraging parents to read to their children or to establish family reading times. In the second year, the activities of the first year were combined with family writing activities. Educational research indicates positive results on achievement tests from students who come from print rich homes. Key characteristics in these homes include parental role models who are readers and parents who commit time on a daily basis to be involved in reading to and with their children. Parents were invited to an evening training session to discuss strategies for reading to their children and guidelines for developing family reading times. Fifteen of the 23 families voluntarily participated during the first year; participation was greatest among K-1 and 4-5 classes. Pre- and post-program attitude measures indicated the greatest change in developing positive attitudes toward reading were found in the grades with the greatest participation. Active voluntary participation by parents who spend more time reading with their children suggest the project's positive effect on parent participants. Four tables list specific benefits of the project and provide suggestions for managing family reading and writing activities. (LP)

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Partners In Literacy Share The Joy Of Reading- A Partnership With Parents in a Small Rural School

Presented by Rod Boss, Principal at Phelps County R-6 School District and Glen Powell, University of Nebraska at Kearney

1991 Annual Convention of the National Rural Education Association Jackson, Mississippi, October 10th

The Phelps County R-6 School District's Partners in Literacy Project is an attempt to develop and enhance a partnership between the school staff, the parents and the children who are enrolled. The focal point of the project is the promotion of parental participation in literacy development of their children. The project is based upon models of parental involvement with reading proposed by Vukelich (1984), Rasinski and Fredericks (1988) and Wepner and Caccavale (1991).

The Project was developed under the sponsorship of Educational Service Unit 11 and the supervision of Jerry Gronewold, Staff Development Director. Educational Service Unit 11 serves a six county area in rural south-central Nebraska. The school staff (Andrea Durfee, Karen Kreutzer, Robin Shield, Patti Faggott and Rod Boss) in collaboration with Glen Powell (University of Nebraska at Kearney) and Jerry Gronewold developed the Partners in Literacy Project. The primary goal was to more greatly involve the parents in the literacy development of their children through participation and modeling.

The Phelps County R-6 School District truly exemplifies the concept of rural education. The staff of 6 serves a student body of 43 students. The students are from 23 families whose livelihood is primarily dependent upon agriculture.

The project is currently in its second year. The first year focused on encouraging parents to read to their children or to establish family reading times. The second year, is continuing the activities of the first year with the addition of family writing activities.

The positive results (See Table I) on achievement tests that are obtained from students who come from print rich home environments is one of the best documented areas of educational research (Anderson et.al., 1985; U.S. Department of Education, 1986; Morrow, 1985; Becher, 1985; Vukelich, 1984; Smith, 1988; Mavrogenes, 1990; Doakes, 1988). Key characteristics found in these homes include parental role models who are readers and parents who read to their children. It has also been found that these parents commit time on a daily basis to be involved reading to and with their children. However, many parents (1) stop reading to their children, (2) never have read to their children or (3) have not served as the type of role models that will have a positive impact on reading performance in school.

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TABLE I

SPECIFIC BENEFITS OBTAINED BY PARENTS READING TO THEIR CHILDREN
1. Children have an increased listening vocabulary.
2. Children have an increased speaking vocabulary.
3. Children have better letter recognition knowledge.
4. Their spoken sentences are of greater length.
5. They have a greater knowledge of a variety of language patterns.
6. Children have a wider range of comprehending abilities.
7. A greater number of concepts are known.
8. Children possess a greater interest in books and reading.
9. Children develop a view that reading is valuable.
10. Children acquire the concept that readers focus on the "message" not on letters and words.
11. Children learn about the process of using print to tell a story.
12. Children learn to make predictions about print.
13. Their attention spans are increased.
14. The "process" of reading is modeled so that children see the "whole" rather than the "parts".
15. Children learn how to handle books.
16. Children are better able to gain control over print.
17. Reading fluency is developed.
18. The concept of left-to-right directionality is developed.

This project was designed to encourage parents to either continue to read or to begin to read to their children on a regular basis or to model literacy by establishing a family reading time. The parents were invited to an evening training session to discuss strategies that were presented in a pamphlet for reading to their children (See Table II: Guidelines for Reading to your Child) and developing family reading times (See Table III: Guidelines for Establishing Family Reading Time). The guidelines that were presented tried to cover a wide range of familial differences to help the parents who were not sure about what to do as well as help those who were already deeply involved in reading with their children.

Table II

TIPS ON READING TO YOUR CHILD
Reading to your child is one of the most pleasant and rewarding activities that you can undertake as a parent. By reading to your child you serve as a role model and you help develop your child's reading ability. Very few other activities will provide the positive payoffs in helping foster success in learning that are provided by reading to your child on a regular basis.

The following suggestions are provided for your consideration if you select reading to your child as your Partners in Literacy Project activity.

1. Establish a regularly scheduled time for reading to your child. For example, good times for reading are just after dinner in the evening or before bedtime.
2. The number of times a week you read can have an important impact on achievement in reading. Ideally, reading to your child every day would be your goal. However, there are times when that is not possible. When that is the case, research suggests that a minimum of four times a week can help your child's reading achievement.
3. The amount of time you spend each day reading to your child is also important. As a goal for completing this activity, you should plan on spending 10-20 minutes reading to your child.
4. It is very difficult to compete with the television set. Thus, it is a good idea to plan a family quiet time when reading aloud to your child. This can first be accomplished by turning off the tv, radio and stereo. Another way family quiet time can be accomplished is to have other members of the family reading to themselves or have your spouse read to a brother or sister.
5. Obtaining good books is an important factor in reading to your child. A basic rule of thumb is to allow your child to select the book. The students will have an opportunity to bring home books from school.Another source is the public library. Obtain library cards for yourself and your child and go to the library on a regular basis.
6. Reading to your child should be one of the most natural things you ever do. Therefore, just relax and enjoy yourself. There are some tips that you may follow if you would like some guidance. They are:
    a. Take your time and encourage your child to talk about the book. Many parents read the story and do not give their child a chance to talk about it. You can encourage your child's discussion of the book in the following ways.
    1. Have your child describe the picture on the cover.You may also discuss what the book is going to be about based on the cover picture and the title.
    2. Have your child describe pictures in the story as you read.
    3. Ask your child what they think will happen next in the story.
    4. Ask your child how he or she would like the story to end.
    5. Encourage your child to tell you about favorite parts of the story. Then reread those parts.
    6. Encourage your child to draw pictures about the story or to make up their own version.

b. **Encourage your child to help you read the story. Have your child help by turning the pages and reading repetitive words or phrases. A note of caution; reading repetitive words or phrases works best if the story has been read to them before and contains words or phrases that are frequently repeated.**

c. **Use your finger to trace your progress across the page if young children are watching you read. By doing this, youare teaching them that you read from left to right.**

d. **Books may be read more than once. Children enjoy having favorites reread to them. In fact, these are the very books that help young children learn how to read. So, do not worry about trying to read a wide variety of new books to your child. Relax and read and reread the one's your child enjoys.**

Table III

TIPS ON ESTABLISHING A FAMILY READING TIME

Establishing a family reading time can be one of the most rewarding and relaxing activities that you can do to help develop both your child's reading ability as well as interest in reading. This activity provides you with an opportunity to be a positive reading role model for your child. This is a very important activity because many children do not see their parents read. Many parents, who like to ready, wait until the children are in bed to read. The end result is that many children think that their parents do not like to read. This activity also provides an alternative for those families who have children that do not want their parents to read to them.

The following suggestions are provided for your consideration if you select the establishment of a family reading time as your Partners in Literacy activity.

1. Establish a regularly scheduled time for family reading. This type of activity is most effective if the scheduled time is consistent. Evenings after dinner or before bedtime are often the best for many families.
2. It is better to use a short block of time. A block which is approximately 20 minutes in length is recommended. If your family is not used to reading for that long a period of time you may want to start with a shorter amount and move up to a 20 minute block of time.
3. It is very difficult to compete with the television set. Therefore, you will need to turn off the tv, stereo or radio.
4. The family reading time should be very flexible. It can include reading to one child while others are reading to themselves.
5. The availability of materials to read will make or break the success of your family reading time. Ideally, there would be a choice of books, magazines or newspapers to choose from. A good way to obtain materials at little or no cost is to have your children bring books home from school and to use the library in Holdrege. A survey of reading preferences last

year suggests that newspapers and magazines will be especially useful for older students and fathers.

6. Family reading times may consist of free choice selections or around themes. Some examples of themes might include:
   a. Reading about special topics that your student may bring home.
   b. Special topics being studied at school.
   c. Holidays or the seasons.
   d. Family trips or activities.
   e. Personal or family hobbies.
7. Family reading time could be used to accomplish tasks or activities together. Some examples are:
   a. Reading and following directions for cooking.
   b. Sorting out coupons and ads for shopping.
   c. Making up shopping, chore or daily activity lists.
   d. Building something by following the written directions.
8. Storytelling could also be done during family reading time.

Each family was required to adapt the guidelines to their own family situation and design their own program. They were then required to turn in a weekly log indicating which activity they had undertaken. The emphasis was on participation and not on a quantitative competition to determine who read the most books or spent the most time reading. The project was begun in November after harvest and ended at the end of March. All families who participated in the project were given certificates of recognition for their participation.

Fifteen of the 23 families participated during the first year of the project. We felt that this was an exceptional response since participation was voluntary. Participation was greatest among the K-1 and 4-5 classes. Pre and post attitude scales were given and the greatest changes in developing or reinforcing positive attitudes were found in the same grades with the greatest participation.

The second year of the project has followed the same basic format as the first year. The major change was the addition of a family writing component. A variety of ideas were brainstormed by the development team and then included in the pamphlet provided to the parents (See Table IV: Family Writing Activities).

Table IV

TIPS ON ESTABLISHING A FAMILY WRITING TIME

Parents can play a key role in helping their children become effective writers. Writing is a tool that is used throughout one's life. We use it all the time to communicate messages and ideas.

Writing is often thought of being something that is hard to do. We probably got that idea from writing assignments we had in school. However, writing can be fun and entertaining as well as an important tool. The following activities are intended to be useful for promoting the concept that writing can be entertaining as well as functional for everyday life. The family writing time option can be used to provide variety while participating in the project. You may also wish to adapt it to blend some of the activities into family reading time.

1. Retelling stories that have been read is an excellent activity for promoting reading comprehension. It is also an excellent writing activity. It can easily be done with younger children by having them retell the story and you as a parent writing what your child says. You may then read their version together. Some children do best with this activity if they look at pictures in the book or draw their own picture prior to retelling the story.
2. A good writing activity is to change the ending of a story. You could accomplish this activity two different ways. One way would be to have your child make up a different ending and you write what is stated by your child. A second way would be to work together as a team brainstorming and writing an ending together.
3. Wordless picture books or regular picture books are good sources for making up stories. The pictures serve as a guide and you make up the story to match the pictures.
4. Family activities can be excellent sources for making up stories. You could turn a family activity into a story. It could be illustrated and made into a book.
5. A very popular activity can be undertaken by having every family member keep a personal journal. The key is that journals are private. However, you may wish to have sharing time on a voluntary basis. You may wish to focus the journal on specific topics. For example each person may be expected to write about one good thing that happened to them that day.
6. A good group activity would be to keep a family journal. Each person would be expected to contribute one item to the journal.
7. A quite different activity would be to have written conversations. A conversation would have to be conducted by writing back and forth to each other.
8. Many families like to share old times or family stories. These could be compiled into a family history. A family history could be written formally to describe the family or it could be an informal collection of family stories.
9. A family message board could be used for communicating with each other through writing. This activity is very useful because it demonstrates the practical everyday use of writing as a communication tool.
10. Construct lists for shopping, chores or personal schedules. This activity demonstrates how you can use writing to help organize your daily life.
11. Family Christmas letters and chain letters can be an entertaining way to demonstrate the use of writing as a tool for communicating with others.

The project was launched to promote parent involvement in literacy development. Due to the small number of students it is quite difficult to analyze success through the traditional criteria of test data. However, the large voluntary participation and comments by parents that they spend more time with their children suggest that it is having an effect. One of the teachers commented that her students were discussing what they read at home instead of the usual discussions of what they watched on TV. We believe that this comment alone suggests that the program is having a positive effect and will hopefully help develop lifetime readers as a result of parental participation.

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